

THE WEB OF FATE

Or, A Revolutionary Scout

By BYRON DOWLING

you acknowledge allegiance, if not to King George?"

"To God, to the chosen rulers of the people! To my country!" exclaimed Aurora, in an impassioned tone, with her eyes, ordinarily so soft, in this expression, seemed to flash lightning from beneath their long lashes.

The captain started as if thunder struck, but had the tact to smother his loyal indignation, as he muttered, "There will be little hope for the success of our arms, if all the ladies are like you, Miss Maxwell. Excuse the introduction of a subject, which I cannot agree, I will take care henceforth not to bring up on the carpet."

"Thanks," replied Aurora, and she flushed left her cheeks, which bloomed like a fresh-plucked rose. The delicacy of the captain had been profound, appreciated, and he felt that at last he saw one whose bewitching charm were heightened by the possession of a soul capable of true feeling.

Miss Maxwell entered at this moment, and was delighted to witness the apparent cordiality between the guests and his niece. "It is delightful weather," he remarked, and I think you young people would enjoy a ride."

"I should be delighted to accompany Miss Maxwell," said the captain with a courteous bow.

"Let us wait until tomorrow," replied Aurora, "and visit the Fallall falls."

"By all means," said the captain, "I have often heard of that wonder of nature, and shall be delighted to accompany Miss Maxwell."

"As you just now remarked," said she, "with an arch smile, "tomorrow, then, we will have an early dinner and start. It is the most agreeable time of day for a ride."

"I shall await your orders," replied the captain, "and now, if you will excuse me, I will tell Sergeant Halbert to see that my horse is ready for the start. These rough paths render it necessary to have the animal's feet in good order."

"Certainly," remarked Mr. Maxwell, "and remember that we have a good smith here at the 'Stronghold.'"

Strutting towards the stable, the captain found his faithful assistant busily engaged in cleaning his holster pistols. Rising as the officer approached, he saluted him by raising his right hand to his cap, and then stood motionless.

"Ah, sergeant, getting ready for action?"

"Yes, sir, I do not really expect any danger."

"Whiskers! Why man, there is not a whiff within a hundred miles of here."

"Glad to hear it, sir!"

"Yes, and in a day or two you will see a hundred or two of the loyal inhabitants here, well armed, and ready to combat the saucy North Carolina lads."

"Hope to see them, sir."

"You will, sergeant, and what a deal of drilling you will have to do. It will not answer to be too severe, however. Be decided, but not harsh in your movements."

"Don't think I will, sir," laconically responded the sergeant, whose countenance wore a curious expression of distrust.

"Well, and now I think it is best to let Selim's feet be attended to at one o'clock, for a ride."

"And me, sir?"

"No, no! You remain here, though you may keep your ears open, and if you hear anything out of the way, report it."

"Humph!" muttered the veteran after his commander had left. "He had better keep his eyes open. Never mind. His pistols aren't miss fire."

That evening, and the next morning, Captain Trevor was almost constantly at Aurora's side. The more he conversed with her, the more he found to admire. It was evident that, although reared in the wilds, her education was of a refined order, tempered by commanding powers of thought, lofty impulses, and above all, the vivifying ladyhood of nature in her purest aspect. True, she was bitterly opposed to the British government, but her very opposition had a charm for him, who had hitherto looked upon her sex as mere puppets. Perhaps he might ask her to wear the Fitzhew coronet, and of course she would be proud to accept that honor, though she was with rebellious thoughts. Little knew the titled scion of nobility with what contempt Aurora regarded him in her heart, even when she was listening to his pleasant discourse.

"Now, captain," exclaimed Aurora, in a gay tone as she entered the library, "I am equipped for the ride, and as the horses are at the door, suppose we start."

"With pleasure!"

The captain's chestnut charger, "Selim," stood motionless before the door. Sergeant Halbert standing at his shoulder to hold the stirrups. Aurora's horse was a black thoroughbred, who pawed the ground with impatience until his mistress had vaulted into her saddle, when the noble animal stood motionless, his neck curved, and his small ears pointed forward. She wore a closely fitting short riding dress over her long skirt, and a broad hat with a waving plume.

"Return before dark," said Mr. Maxwell, as they left the house.

"Certainly, uncle," replied Aurora, while the captain bowed assent.

"Had better," growled the sergeant. The day was of sunlight and glory. The face of nature beamed with doral smiles, and the thick foliage of the forest waved in the gentle breeze, as if with emotions of gladness. Floating masses of brilliant clouds sailed about the sky, their semi-transparent

parent edges glistening like burnished gold, through which gleamed the bright rays of the god of day.

In narrating the escape of Rupert London from the "Stronghold," we have already described the path traversed by the equestrians, who chattered pleasantly as they rode along. The captain was unusually brilliant, carefully shunning political topics, and Aurora had evidently determined to make the time pass pleasantly. The young officer, who had been insensible to the charms of many a city belle, now bowed in admiration before this rustic beauty—not merely in fancy, but with that deep passion which hearts alone are capable of.

"Are we not far enough from the 'Stronghold' to recall Mr. Maxwell's caution?" at length remarked Captain Trevor, as they let their horses walk up a slight eminence.

"What?" merrily replied Aurora, "are you already tired of my society? Really, I did not expect that."

"Spare me—spare me," interrupted the captain, "I would willingly ride to the world's end in such pleasant society, but—"

"But!" interrupted Aurora in her turn. "But is called by you gentlemen a woman's word, yet your sex, if I mistake not, are fond of using it."

"My, Miss Maxwell, hear me. I only feared that if we outstayed our time, your uncle might not be disposed to let us ride again—a happiness that I trust often to enjoy."

"And which you have no desire to prolong. But let us retrace our steps, although, if my old nurse knew this, she would be sadly disappointed."

"I beg of you to go on, especially if you wish to see any one."

"Well, then, to speak frankly, I would like to proceed about half a mile further, that I may visit a nurse of mine who lives there. That is, if it is not disagreeable to Captain Trevor."

"Captain Trevor will ever find it agreeable to escort Miss Maxwell—through life, if she chooses so to elect."

Aurora colored.

"You must admit," said she, with an almost inexpressible shade of sarcasm in her tone, "that no country which you have visited can show a more beautiful forest ride than this."

The remark was made with such self-possession, that Captain Trevor felt almost inclined to be provoked at her indifference, but thought it best to remain silent. Selim received a thrust of his spurs, and in a moment or two he replied:

"Beautiful—wildly picturesque as this scene is, I almost feel inclined to prefer one with which I am familiar."

"And where is that, pray?"

"It is a large park, around a Norman castle in the south of England. Hundreds of acres are covered with a smooth carpet of grass, and shaded by old oaks, monarchs of the forest, through whose gnarled boughs come the sunlight. This scene surpasses it in picturesque grandeur, but that, in its quiet majesty, only lacks one thing to make it dearer to me than all the world besides."

"And what is that, captain?"

"The park is that of my father, Miss Maxwell, but it lacks—"

"Some loyal demesne!" interrupted Aurora, "who will reflect no discredit upon the titled occupants of the castle, and will puppet-like play her part in the pageant of royalty. Come, let us have a race. Which will reach the summit of yonder hill first?"

There was a malicious sparkle of triumph in Aurora's eyes, as she urged her horse into a canter, followed by her discomfited cavalier, who was evidently somewhat abashed. With a his exertions he could not reach the indicated goal until some moment after his competitor was there. Selim was rather famed for power than speed.

"I acknowledge myself beaten," was his frank remark as he reached Aurora's side, "but I give you fair notice that I shall not leave the field."

"To be unsuccessful?" asked Aurora with an arch smile.

"I hope not!"

At this moment a distant noise distinctly upon the ears of the equestrians.

"Tell me," asked the captain, "that the hooting of an owl?"

"It sounds like it," was the reply, but as she spoke, Aurora bent her head, and a crimson hue suffused her cheeks. She recognized the well-known cry of the Sharpshooters, and feared for a moment that her companion might get into trouble. By reflection, she felt assured that her influence would protect him, and so they pursued their journey.

A hundred yards farther beyond was the spot where her interview with Lydston had been overheard, and on turning around a large rock, she saw, to her astonishment—Rupert London.

"Yes, the young officer, haunted by a desire to revisit the spot where he had last seen her, had found his way thither with the aid of a guide, who was now at Danforth's house. Absorbed in thought, he did not hear the horses as they came along on the green sward at the side of the narrow path. Starting to his feet, he saw her who had taken entire possession of his heart."

"Miss Maxwell!" he exclaimed, "seeing her companion in the well-known uniform of England, he drew himself proudly up at the side of his horse and raised his cap with polite courtesy."

A warm thrill of heart-blood at the unexpected sight of Rupert made Aurora almost reel in her saddle, but it was but for a second. Her quick perception taught her that she had perhaps endangered the life of one in whom she felt an indescribable interest, and without hesitation she rode up to Rupert, extending her hand.

"Mr. Rupert," said she, "I hope you are well. Let me introduce you to Captain Trevor, of the king's officers, who is my married escort."

Each of the gentlemen bowed to the other, with a forced smile, for the eyes of either sparkled defiance. Captain Trevor saw at a glance that Rupert was a continental officer, and his sword and pistols made him at once a formidable opponent, even if there were no band in ambush or within call. But what was the most galling to his proud spirit was a sudden conviction that Aurora had come hither to see him. He would have given his commission for his arms, and a certainty that there would be no inter-

ruption. Nor was Rupert less annoyed. He attributed the slight agitation, the changing color, and the half-averted eyes of Aurora to her being discovered with her companion. Neither could he but think that Captain Trevor was the affianced lover of whom he had heard her speak, at that very spot.

"Gentlemen," said Aurora, in a sweet, soft voice, that thrilled through the heart of each listener, as he drank in every tone, "you are arrayed under different flags, but do not carry your feuds into private life. Captain Trevor, you will excuse me for an instant, while I say a few words to Mr. Rupert."

"Certainly," replied the captain, fixing a searching gaze upon her, as she rode up to Rupert's side.

"Major London, she said, in a low tone, "I thought you were at the camp. Where is Mr. Danforth?"

"Gone," was the laconic response, for Rupert could not unfasten the conduct of her whom he recognized as sovereign of his affections—neither saw he the propriety of submitting to the examination of one thus the companion of an enemy."

"Say, then, to Lydston, that I will see him to-morrow, here," then raising her voice she continued, "I should like to see her to-day, but cannot. Good afternoon, sir. Now, Captain Trevor, let us return."

Ere Rupert could recover from his astonishment they had turned their steeds, and rode back the way in which they had come.

The captain was, if possible, more mystified, but not a word was exchanged until the approached the "Stronghold," and slackened their pace as they ascended a hill, when he exclaimed:

"Miss Maxwell!"

"Captain Trevor!"

"I trust that your ride has been as agreeable as—"

"Quite so."

"Excuse me, also, if I suggest to Miss Maxwell that when she has a rendezvous with a whig officer, for I will not use the word rebel, it is rather an assumption of power to compel one of his majesty's officers to act as a go-between."

"Stop, sir!" exclaimed Aurora, checking her horse and drawing herself up in her saddle until she was the imperiousness of queenly beauty.

"I assure, Captain Trevor, upon my honor, that I have but a slight acquaintance with the gentleman we met so accidentally. Yes, you may smile, but this meeting was accidental, and I regret it."

"Excuse me," stammered the captain, "for I feel that I wronged you, but—"

Her attention was arrested by the shrill notes of a trumpet from the "Stronghold." Listening, he exclaimed:

"Those are British notes. I feared at first that your acquaintance might have managed to get here by a short-cut route, and occupy the house."

"You spoke true in his power should speak thus of him. But you were correct in your conjectures, for see, here come the red-coats."

It was a troop of English dragoons, and as Captain Trevor approached, they were thrown into line. Bringing his men to a salute, the commanding officer rode up and asked:

"Is this Captain Trevor that I have the honor of address?"

"Your servant," replied the captain, reining in his horse.

"Gen. Tarlton ordered me to report to you, sir, and inform you that you might be in danger from an organization of rebels, which he has learned has formed in this vicinity. Mr. Maxwell has kindly offered us quarters, but learning from him that you were in the woods without escort, I determined to join you."

The troop was brought into column, and soon the spacious stables of the "Stronghold" were filled with their horses, while their tired riders were enjoying the contents of a large tub. It was apparently filled with milk, but one of the troopers declared, with an oath, that the cow which gave that milk must have been fed on brandy-cherries.

Mr. Maxwell was not visible, but refreshments for the officers were prepared in the dining-room. After partaking of them, Captain Trevor invited the commander of the dragoons to his chamber, leaving the lieutenants to finish the bottles.

Rupert, meanwhile, had rejoined his guide at Mrs. Danforth's, and slowly returned to the camp. He found the adjutant much better, although he seemed extremely taciturn. Sergeant Danforth was away "on a scout," and Rupert, after a multitude of vague conjectures respecting Aurora, retired to his couch.

Sweet sleep! When every passion is controlled and every pain quieted—when every unchained soul soars at will on rapid wing.

CHAPTER VIII.
PLOT—COMLOT AND COUNTER-PLOT.

"Really, my dear fellow," said Captain Trevor to his companion, when they had seated themselves, "I am glad to see you, but I have no fears of surprise. Firstly, because the loyalists have everything their own way here; secondly, because there is not an unwhig whig in the whole mountain range; and thirdly, because I have already enlisted a full company of rifle-men, who will be here in a few days, with their equipments. Lastly, as our regimental chaplain says, old Maxwell here is confirmed in his allegiance by the 'bad' I brought him, and now, to conclude, I have an idea of marrying his pretty daughter."

"Capital, 'pon honor," replied Captain Foster, who was one of the few British officers who had won his rank at the point of his sword. Without fortune or rank, he was nevertheless one of "nature's noblemen," and whenever there was danger to be combated, a company of unwilling recruits to be disciplined, or a difficult order to be executed, the name of Foster was the first that presented itself to his commanders.

"Yes, indeed," earnestly responded Trevor to his companion's half-bantering remark. "She is an angel, and I hope Tarlton will not order me away until she surrenders at discretion."

"Gad, I think I will resign then, and live here, not bad quarters, eh?"

"No indeed, Trevor, but it is not to you what Capua was to the great

"Not a whit of it. Ah, you are too strict a disciplinarian, although I hope some day to witness your capitulation. Tell me, though, have I not made good use of my time?"

"How shall I know? Has the lady surrendered?"

"There you are again. I talk about a lady and you, looking grave, lecture me on duty. Charging front, I speak of Mars, and you, breaking column to the rear, talk about Venus."

"Seriously, then, are you certain that all is right in this region?"

"I have not the least doubt of the loyalty and true allegiance of every man. Why, it is not a week since I arrived, and I have already enlisted a company, as I told you before."

"What class of men are your recruits?"

"Why—ahem—they are good men. That is, I have not seen them, but—"

"Not seen them, and where are they?"

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"How shall I know? Has the lady surrendered?"

"There you are again. I talk about a lady and you, looking grave, lecture me on duty. Charging front, I speak of Mars, and you, breaking column to the rear, talk about Venus."

"Seriously, then, are you certain that all is right in this region?"

"I have not the least doubt of the loyalty and true allegiance of every man. Why, it is not a week since I arrived, and I have already enlisted a company, as I told you before."

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